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THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE FUTURE LIFE

A CONSTRUCTIVE STUDY

II. SOME CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE OLDER AND THE NEWER METHOD OF CONCEIVING THE PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION

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The doctrine of a future life is a growing fact and not a constant quantity. In the large, this growth expresses a twofold social advance: (1) the development of religious conceptions—more specifically the growing idea of God; (2) the developing ethical consciousness. But there is no abstract and independent sense in which the religious and moral life of men advances. Religion and morals are articulated into the conceptual life of the race in terms of which we express our convictions about reality, cosmical, social, psychological, scientific, and philosophic. Morality and religion are human facts, and as such reflect the forms of our intelligence in every field of its activity. So in inquiring about the laws of the growth of a spiritual doctrine like that of a future life, we must give heed to the changing methods of thought and the changing conceptual forms which have successively dominated the progressive life of society. Our forecast of the future state of any vital doctrine—our estimate, indeed, of its intrinsic meaning for the present—must be in the nature of an induction from the laws of mind which have manifestly expressed or controlled the growth of the past.

This paper, then, has to do with some of the manifest contrasts between the intellectual atmosphere or climate in which men of the past formulated their spiritual problems and profounded their resolution, and the modern scientific way of thinking these same problems. And in this brief analysis we must constantly keep in mind that conceptual method, and not specific conclusions either of the past or present, is the real goal of our inquiry. Moreover, it

is the controlling "social consciousness" which conditions an age's thinking, and not some sporadic individual insight with which we have to do.

In characterizing somewhat specifically these fundamental contrasts between the earlier historic attitude touching belief in a future life and the modern attitude, an exhaustive or exact analysis is not necessary—is not indeed possible. It is sufficient for our practical purpose to point out some of the more obvious transformations that have taken place in our thought-world.

1. In a previous paper we pointed out that the distinctive thing in the modern method of approach to all problems is the newer recognition of relativity everywhere in our human world, where former generations assumed fixedness and finality. As related to the problem of a future life we may formally enumerate this principle again here as a shaping factor of immense consequence in producing a rational doctrine of a future life. A conception of truth which looks for fixed items of information and final conceptions of reality that shall become the absolute possession of all thinkers, conducts to absolute "systems" of thought; to finally authoritative and rigid "revelations"; to "infallible rules of faith and practice"—in short to dogmas that bear the image and superscription of the unchangeable "divine" or the unchangeable "truth" and which are therefore current for all times and peoples. This ideal of truth has controlled the eager search for a final revelation concerning an unseen world. Doctrines of future life born of time-needs have been erected as eternal "revelations." In particular, the Bible has been regarded as a textbook containing final information. Jesus' words have been scanned with the single intent of gaining the exact outline of the unseen spiritual. Among the multitude of strange and varied schemes of a future life that have been preached, and the definite charts of an unseen world that have been commended to the Christian church, the one ideal of truth was held in common that it is a final piece of information to be gained, and the repository of this truth is the Christian Scriptures. Practically all of the historic treatises on the future life that have had any orthodox standing, and have therefore been influential, have carried this implication of the truth of the Bible.

Now modern thinking about the future life rejects this fundamental presupposition. The spiritual value of the Christian Bible is exalted not less than by the older thinkers. But the mode of conceiving and using the Bible is radically altered. For it is viewed as a record of developing history and not as a body of oracles. The men who appear in the record as well as the men who produce the record are viewed in their historic perspective as *men* and in no way as actors or oracles. The Bible preserves to us the personal experiences, achievements, and convictions of men consciously controlled by the guidance of a living God. An unbiased exegesis of this record finds no final content or *absolutum* which shall serve to standardize future thinking and living; but only living principles given in terms of living history, which in turn can be received and known only in terms of the vital processes of human experience. Thus the whole principle of development is introduced into the past as freely as into the present, and the relativity of a given stage of truth and of revelation is recognized as freely in the past as in the present. Every interpretation of doctrine about life, whether present or future, must bear the test of our best thinking. "Handling the Word of God with reverence" means thinking the Bible record in terms that bring reality into it as a historic creation, and not the attempt to fit its mysteries, like mosaics, into our scheme of thinking.

Modern thinking, then, unlike the older, is released from the acceptance of an ideal of a somewhere given truth about the future life. Like all reverent thinkers, we are seeking to know the truth about the subject, feeling that the truth, *as we can best think it*, can alone set us free from superstition. Moreover, our conception of human thinking, individual and social, precludes the possibility of any finality of revelation about the future life. That is not a rational conception of our task. How may we and how must we think about this persistent, haunting conviction? To answer this question in the light of our best thinking and living and to justify our belief in a way that shall satisfy both the vital and rational tests of life: this seems to us the goal of philosophic construction of spiritual truth.

It must be noted that this changed attitude toward religious

truth has epochal consequences for the man who meditates about the "life everlasting." It makes a vast difference whether we are trying to establish an orthodoxy or are engaged in an unbiased inquiry into the truth. If a man digs in the earth seeking for some "hid treasure" his excavations will not resemble those of the cultivator who tills the soil to discover what it is capable of producing. The contrast between the newer and the older method of dealing with the problem of the future life is not unfairly typified by the parable of the Cultivator and the Excavator.

2. Another fundamental point of contrast between the older and the newer approach to the doctrine of the future life is expressed in the fact that whereas the historic forms of faith usually thought to buttress the belief by independent logical "proofs," such proofs today are usually regarded as beside the mark and unattainable. In other words, the future life was treated as an intellectual conception that must justify itself among other furnishings of the intellect by showing its connection with the "logical reason." Thus in the traditional treatment of the doctrine we find the scholastic rationalism grafted on to the original "absolute revelation," apparently with the intent to make certainty doubly sure.

It is sufficient here to say that this independent logical universal is little sought as the mark of certainty in fruitful thinking today. The pragmatic emphasis does much to correct the abstract rationalism of the traditional account. The confidence and the proof, as well as the form of the doctrine, are determined by what our best life yields and by what bears the test of life.

The original enthusiastic faith of the early church in a future life, however much it rested upon historic credentials, could only have come to such rich expression and such holy confidence in an experience which constituted the real ground for Christian optimism. And today the appeal of most effective thinking is largely away from the abstractions of logic and rational certainties, and directed to the rich content of the personal experience grasping spiritual realities in terms of vital activities, and achieving a confident outlook upon life in terms of personal relationships. In other words, our spiritual certainties rest back upon a moral achievement far more than upon a logical process. In attempting,

then, to state the Christian doctrine of a future life for today, we shall have less regard for logical universals than for the realities of the moral life. The evidence or "proof" and indeed the very experience out of which the belief in immortality arises is so predominantly an experience of the individual mind, conditioned by his own inner life, that formal logic is defeated. We are dealing here with a form of fact and knowledge so immediate and a form of certainty so personal that it does not yield to strictly "logical" methods. In other words, we grasp it rather through activities of will and character than through intellectual activities. And this is quite consistent with the pragmatic view of knowledge which rates personality and its grasp of reality as a vastly larger matter than intellectual apprehension.

The willingness of properly pragmatic thinking today to reckon with vital and constitutional needs, as over against an earlier rationalism, is a characteristic mark of modern thinking. The categories of truth are not chiefly intellectual but experiential. For the values of life are not chiefly logical values, but spiritual.¹

3. Another vast difference between the realities of modern thinking and the realities of ancient thought is the difference which the thoroughgoing conception of law has brought. An earlier age which could separate the natural and the supernatural by a dualistic chasm saw no impropriety in making lawlessness the mark of the divine. Caprice and magic and miracle expressed whatever relationship was conceived to exist between the seen natural and the unseen supernatural. The divine presence and the divine power were best signalized by acts or occurrences which were insoluble on natural grounds. The passage from the natural world to the life of the invisible was construed as a cataclysmic, lawless act of the divine power. Eternal life was an unconditional gift offered at the end of temporal life; opening graves were a fitting exhibition of divine power; the raising of the dead to heavenly places a gracious act of divinity. The whole imagery under which the future was conceived spoke of a conception of life where law and consequence bore little relation to the power at work. The reality of

¹ Cf., e.g., Professor Scott's criticism of the Greek philosophy, in this series, *Biblical World*, July, 1911, p. 25.

the power is never in question. But the divine power is in no way conditioned or expressed by the thought of law.

Moreover—and this is even more consequential for our problem—the relation between the life of the individual here and the life pictured for him in the unseen future is not, in the older thinking, a relation determined by law. To be sure, God is just and bestows rewards and punishments. But divine justice is an arbitrary fact, not a living order of life, just as his gracious acts are conceived as arbitrary acts.

The conception of the future controlled by this obliviousness to the laws which bind our world into a rational universe resulted in all sorts of descriptions of the future and our relationships to it which are not assimilable to modern thinking. A law-saturated age demands this reality of thought which can only come by perceiving a nexus of law to link the visible with the invisible. Thought and conduct and imagination demand a consequential relation of law between the seen and the unseen—if the unseen is not to be disregarded as a realm of chaos or neglected as unreal. Unless there is unity in life, a unity which makes the unseen somehow one with the life we know, where the spiritual laws in operation here conduct us to a law-determined goal; then the doctrine of a future life no longer has a rational appeal. That life should grow and develop, blossoming into forms of reality to which our moral living conducts, and where our spiritual laws are not defeated but recognized; this is at least thinkable to the modern mind. That an omnipotent cataclysmic act should lift us out of the present order of life and knowledge, and present us with a heaven which does not recognize the moral and rational realities of this—this is not only unthinkable, but repugnant. We are interested in a future life which has its roots and its reason and its essential moral form in the spiritual activities of this. Indeed, this is the only moral doctrine of a future life that religion can hold. Only thus could a future existence be prefigured and hence rationally thought in terms of the realities which our best ethical experience knows. Our new heavens, like our new earths, must arise out of the materials of the creative faith by which we now live. Future existence must be thought as continued existence, and not as a strictly new and unrelated order.

The reticence and unwillingness to dogmatize about the future, which characterizes modern thinking, may be after all but a mark of deeper trust in an order-loving God, who works today by law in his world, and whose faithfulness may therefore be trusted for the future. It is ours to know the moral law and to perform it, and find our confidence in continued existence in the doing of things which are intrinsically worth while.

4. Then there is the sweeping change in the mental conceptions in terms of which we measure and evaluate life in every realm of our thinking. Cosmologically, psychologically, socially, metaphysically, scientifically, we are living in a changed thought-world from that of our ancestors. The cosmologies of the ancients could confidently place heaven in the skies and hell beneath. The ascension into heaven was the expression of a pictorial and realistic metaphysics. The bodily resurrection was a necessary thought-form for an age whose psychological notions demanded a material organism for spiritual reality. Doctrines of intermediate states, of purgatory, of formal assizes, and the like are not to be regarded as sacred ultimates of revelation, but as necessary forms of solution of problems which arose out of current scientific and philosophic conceptions.² With the passing of their cosmologies and their metaphysical conceptions of reality, these traditional developments of doctrine lose their validity. The right to rethink the whole problem in terms of our own ruling conceptions of reality is obvious—a plain scientific duty indeed for the thinker of today who is emancipated from the traditional assumption that all religious explanations are eternally valid and to be endlessly repeated. This constitutional, optimistic conviction which refuses to believe that the grave means annihilation or that death has any power over our best spiritual achievement—how shall we construe this Christian Hope, and how justify it? This is the problem for us to solve in terms of our own best thinking, guided by the light which history affords.

Furthermore, it is a part of the same advance of thought which forbids the extreme individualistic conception of personality and

² Cf., e.g., Professor Paton's statement, *Biblical World*, March, 1910, p. 164: "Sheol was primarily a cosmological conception," etc.

frees us from the necessity of carrying all the familiar details of our bodily life over into the unseen world. A more rational psychology and especially a better estimate of spiritual and moral values enable us to leave out certain considerations as negligible which for former generations were matters of fundamental concern. Character, moral worth and activity, spiritual reality in its best estate may very well be freed from some of the familiar conditions that encumber it here. The essentials of spiritual existence and ethical values are the matters that our faith contends for. Our homes and other sacred social institutions which are the condition of our holiest and happiest fellowship here may be superseded by social forms which preserve and exalt the passion of love which constitutes the bond of social unity. Reverent scholarship is much more willing than formerly to be guided by the spirit of Jesus³ and believe that "the power of God" will shape the forms of life, if we are faithful in our fundamental spirit. Hence, doctrine is chiefly concerned to know the essentials of righteous living here; and very little concerned with the conditions that surround life in an unseen realm. The confident conviction of law which a scientific age has brought has contributed not a little to confidence in a faithful God who may be trusted to bring appropriate consequences hereafter to holy living here.

Thus it might be shown that thought operates today with many conceptions that forever invalidate much of the terminology with which tradition surrounds the problem. Life and Death as abstract quantities, and the power of the individual to act in a representative capacity for the race, these thought-units of the New Testament do not express the forms of our convictions about these things. The apostle Paul's familiar argument which functioned with the thinking of his day are not simply to be repeated by us; they are to be interpreted in the frankest sense. Our doctrine of a future life must be given living expression in terms of conceptions as valid and vital for us as were these conceptions in their day.

These are suggestions of only a few of the lines of crystallization which constitute characteristic differences between the account

³ Mark 12:24.

which a past age gave of "the life everlasting," and the account which modern thinking renders. We have no thought of offering a complete rationale of the problem. The whole matter, like all the data of the religious life, lies so deep and begins so instinctively that it is not completely amenable to analysis or logic. The philosophic motives, the conceptual materials, the instinctive or reasoned estimate of the worth or unworth of life, and the varying constitutional moods of optimism or pessimism—these all enter so intimately into our problem and shape it so subtly, weaving such a complex and changeable fabric of belief, that it is impossible to analyze the doctrine into absolutely simple elements. Like the rainbow to which our hope of immortality is so often likened, the historical doctrine of immortality reveals every hue and shade of our thought-spectrum, and shows the influence of the hopes and fears and passions of the race. As the laws of the physical insure a "bow of promise" in the skies so long as atmosphere and sun and rain endure, so the permanence of the belief in immortality seem to be as sure as the laws of the human. We can describe the forms of the past and the present hope and prophesy the future, confident that nothing can destroy the hope which does not destroy that which gives greatest distinction to the human—the spiritual nature. We have here pointed out some of the fundamental contrasts between the doctrines shaped by the life of the past and those shaped by today's life, in the endeavor to understand the formative factors at work in this universal impulse. In our next paper we shall attempt, a little more specifically, to expound the Christian interest in the problem, and the Christian account of it.